



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A post-Civil War population explosion

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Image, Contrabands. Library of Congress.

During and immediately after the Civil War, Alexandria's black population exploded with the arrival of thousands of former slaves called Contrabands, as seen in this etching that records a multi-generational family on its escape to protection behind Union lines.

Before the war, both free and enslaved blacks in Alexandria totaled just under 2,000 and made up less than a quarter of the town's population. An 1866 census done by the Freedmen's Bureau, the federal agency created to help former slaves make the transition to their new status, tallied nearly 8,000 blacks in Alexandria.

For a small city that was just emerging from four years of occupation by Union forces with its economy in tatters, this massive influx of people needing food, shelter and a means of making a living was almost too much to absorb.

The vast majority of these refugees lived in hastily constructed shacks on the outskirts of the downtown area without clean water, adequate food, heat or sanitary facilities. Many moved on to the "Freedmen's Village" in Arlington, which was within Alexandria County at that time, but regardless of where they settled, living conditions were miserable.

A correspondent's account of the "colored settlements" in Washington could have easily described Alexandria, where the "shanties are for the most part badly located, badly built, badly drained, badly ventilated, and in every way, prepared for the reception and propagation of disease in its worst forms."

Some people packed into areas that had been Alexandria's black neighborhoods for years, such as "The Bottoms" or "Hayti" along Duke Street, but other enclaves formed as well. "Uptown" was a large area west of Washington Street and north of Cameron Street that was the beginnings of the Parker-Gray neighborhood. The "Petersburg" neighborhood, shortened to "The Burg" in the 20th century, and "Fishtown" developed just a few blocks from the Potomac River on the north side, where rail lines and the gas works had already given the area an industrial feel.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

This vast migration to Southern cities and towns not only overwhelmed the job market and basic social services in places like Alexandria, but left much of the countryside without sufficient agricultural labor.

Attempting to address both issues, Freedmen's Bureau staff and others tried to get blacks to return to farms and plantations, especially those people who were not originally from Alexandria or the immediate area. Rumors circulated about people being re-enslaved if they went back south looking for work, to the point that bureau staff issued a circular debunking this myth.

In early 1866, local bureau officials reported that they had actually been able to find jobs for most of the initial 100 people who had applied to them, but hundreds more kept coming from other parts of Virginia. The bureau agent in Charlottesville, addressing a large crowd there seeking assistance, urged them to stay on the land and not push into the towns, remarking that "Alexandria was not the way to heaven."

Other local relief organizations struggled to provide services. City council had authorized the Trustees of the Poor to operate a "soup house" for decades, usually during the winter months, and this facility reopened in February 1866. Council also supplemented the basic food rations dispensed by the Freedmen's Bureau by funding "Groceries for [the] outside poor," including items such as fish, cornmeal, flour, sugar, bacon, coffee, molasses, candles, bar soap, coal oil and even chocolate.

L'Ouverture Hospital, which had provided medical care to black troops and civilians, continued to operate until the fall of 1867, when the buildings were broken up and sold by the federal government.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.